

Spending the Day with God sermon series
#2 – Oh What a Beautiful Morning!
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I'm not a morning person. I'm a tried-and-true night owl. In fact, when I was younger, I didn't realize the sun came up before 9 a.m. I figured it got up when I did. I swore coming out of seminary that I would not go to a church that had an early morning service. I guess God had other plans.

But I still struggle with mornings. In my freshman year in college I actually failed a geography course because it met at 8 a.m. and I simply stopped going because that was too early to try and learn something. I deliberately chose my first job at a newspaper because my hours started at 4 p.m., which gave me just enough time to get up, shower and eat breakfast before I had to be at work.

But as I've aged I've been forced to reckon with the fact that the day does start before 9 a.m. and that there may actually be some benefit to being awake for it. We have to get Sydney up early for school each day and as much as I grumble about that – I've nicknamed our alarm clock "Satan" – there is a joy that comes from greeting the day at the beginning instead of in the middle.

We continue our sermon series on spending the day with God by looking at our mornings. I have a feeling a lot of the biblical writers were morning people. In fact, I sense a bit of a bias against us night owls, like when Psalm 30 says, "Sing to the LORD, you saints of his; praise his holy name. For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning." I know some people who rejoice quite heavily in the night and then weep in the morning, but I don't think that's what the psalmist was talking about here.

This Psalm touches on an important biblical theme here when it comes to mornings, and that is the sense of renewal, the idea that every morning brings with it a new day. It's more than just another 24 hours. It's more than what the bumper sticker says: "Same stuff, different day." I edited that for church use. Instead, each day is something totally new. The hymn "Morning Has Broken" ends by saying, "Praise with elation, praise every morning, God's re-creation of the new day." In other words, each day is a re-creation of the new day, the first day when God created this world.

And if we carry that metaphor forward, then not only is the day re-created, but so are we. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, "Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day." There are a lot of mornings when I wake up with aches and pains that are a reminder of the outwardly wasting away, but how many mornings do I remember Paul's words about this daily renewal?

Each day when we wake up God is calling us forth once again into the day God has created for us. Darkness was upon the face of the earth, and God said, "Let there be light." Darkness surrounds me as I sleep and God says, "Let there be Kory." And there is Kory. Maybe a bit groggy, maybe with sleep in his eyes, but there is Kory, standing as a new creation at the threshold of this new day.

Of course, that may be a bit Pollyanna-ish of me. Maybe each day really is just another day. Sure, each day is a chance for renewal but it's also another chance for

failure. You know how the morning prayer goes: “Dear God, I think you'd be proud of me! So far today I've done all right. I haven't gossiped, lusted, lost my temper, haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish or overindulgent. I'm very thankful for that. In a few minutes, though, I'm going to get out of bed. From then on I'm probably going to need a LOT of help.”

I have to admit that I don't always wake up and claim the renewal Paul talked about. In fact, usually my first thoughts in the morning are much more mundane and task-oriented. Many times my waking thoughts are not about God or creation or anything spiritual. Instead, the first thing I think of is my to-do list. What's on the agenda for today? What's in that square on my calendar? The weight of the day starts to bear down on us even before we rise.

That's why I really like the Mark passage we read today. Mark tells us that very early in the morning, so early it was still dark (which must mean it was before 9 a.m.), Jesus goes off by himself to pray. While he's praying, enjoying his solitude, a few disciples come to him and say, “Everyone is looking for you!” So much for solitude and prayer and time with God.

I can't begin to count how many mornings I've been awake by the thump-thump-thump of my girls' pajama feet running into our room, “Daddy, when are you going to get up and make pancakes?” Or the ring of the phone. Or my own to-do list flashing like a neon sign in my head. It's not really very peaceful to wake up with a sense of urgency about the day. “Everyone is looking for you!”

The problem is that if we start our day by trying to respond to that statement, we can easily forget who we are. We are not just a parent or child or consumer or pancake-maker or chauffeur or employee or square filler. We are a child of God. And if we don't start our day with that reminder, we may forget it. We are going to be overwhelmed with messages during the day about our worth and how it is calculated. We'll be told over and over that we are either too important because everyone is looking for us or not important enough because we don't own the right things or look the right way or run with the right crowd.

But our value is not determined by what others think or say about us. Our value starts with our Creator, the one who called us forth and said, “Let there be Kory!” Our value as human beings comes simply from the fact that God values us and has created this day for us. Each morning is a resurrection, a return from the darkness of sleep into the light of God's love. Each day is a new day with great potential if we choose to start it that way, if we choose to make God part of our morning routine.

There was a rabbinic tradition in Jesus' day that a devout Jew would bless God at least one hundred times a day. It would start with waking up: “Blessed art Thou, O Sovereign of the Universe, that you have delivered me from darkness and opened my eyes.”

That's an amazing routine to have. We all have our morning routines, but probably nothing like that. You know, it's a bit peculiar to me how much we do to take care of our bodies each morning. We brush our teeth, we shower, we exercise, we put on deodorant, we eat food for nourishment. And yet, do we give our faith the same attention? To paraphrase Jesus, what good is it to have a well-toned, well-fed, cleaning-smelling body and yet forfeit your soul?

I couldn't imagine going a week without brushing my teeth or taking a shower or eating. And yet many times we'll go a week or longer without doing something in the morning to nourish our faith and our relationship with God. Just as we need physical energy for the day, we need spiritual energy to face the challenges and opportunities that await us.

More than anything, I believe morning is the best time to truly experience God's presence before the urgency sets in and everyone starts looking for you. As we take in the early light, the stillness, the genesis of the day, God is there. I remember one particular morning when this was true for me. I was in high school and was on vacation with my dad and his family down in Florida. We were staying in a condo that sat on a water channel to the ocean and we spent our day fishing the channel. The weather was sticky, the current was swift and the bait was really stinky, but it was still vacation. One morning my dad, who is an obnoxiously early riser, came into my room and woke me up to come out fishing with him. I was tempted to remind Dad that I could just as easily fish in the afternoon, but something in his voice made me get up.

When I got out to the dock, I could see why Dad wanted to share the morning. The weather was perfect, the channel was as still as a lake and even the bait didn't smell as bad. I don't remember if we caught anything that morning, but I will never forget standing beside my father, just him and me, enjoying the beginning of another day.

Every day will bring with it its joys and its challenges, its triumphs and its failures. No two days are the same, which is all the more reason we need to ground ourselves in the stability and dependability of God's love and presence with us. We don't know what this day brings, but each morning we have the opportunity to pause, to give thanks, and to invite God with us into it. You know, we can try to go it alone, to start the day as if we're in charge. But, with God on our side, why would we?